

Readings

Ez 34:11-12, 15-17

Ps 23:1-2, 2-3, 5-6

1 Cor 15:20-26, 28

Mt 25:31-46

Francis J. Caponi, O.S.A.
Villanova University
Villanova, Pennsylvania

Next week is the First Sunday of Advent, the start of another year in the life of the Church. That makes today the Church's New Year's Eve. Even though it's still November, today, the feast of Christ the King, is our New Year's Eve.

What we say at the end of things is important. When General MacArthur left the Philippines, he said, "I shall return." Nathan Hale, the great American patriot, ended his life with the ringing declaration, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." Rhett Butler, as he walked out on Scarlett O'Hara, said, "Frankly, my dear..." Well, you know the rest. At graduations and funerals, we expect speakers to try to offer something significant, maybe even memorable. And we give special heed to last requests and deathbed declarations. When someone has only a little breath to speak a few final words, he should be done with to-do lists and small talk.

So it is with today's gospel. What Christ spoke towards the end of his own life is now proclaimed at the end of the Church year. His words are chosen carefully. We should listen closely. What do we hear?

Christ says that when we feed the hungry, when we give drink to the thirsty, when we comfort those who are lonely, take care of those who are ill, and visit prisoners, we are serving

him. Christ does not say, “When you feed the hungry it is *like* you are feeding me.” He doesn’t say, “When you visit someone in prison, it’s *as if* you were visiting me.” Christ does not tell us to *pretend*: “Pretend that the person without clothes is me. Pretend that the person in the hospital is me. Make believe that I am hungry, I am cold, I am sick.” No, Christ says: “That person is me. You feed me. You clothe me. You visit me. You take care of me, because I am hungry, cold, and sick.”

This should come as no surprise. Christ says, “This is my body,” and it *is* his body we eat. Christ says, “This is my blood,” and it *is* his blood we drink. Christ says, “Whatever you did for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me,” and it *is* Christ we feed when we give to the hungry, Christ we clothe when we give to the poor, Christ we greet when we welcome the stranger.

One of the great holy women of the last century, Servant of God Dorothy Day, instructs us in this truth:

It is no use saying that we are born two thousand years too late to give room to Christ. Nor will those who live at the end of the world have been born too late. Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts. But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that He speaks, with the eyes of store clerks, factory workers, and children that He gazes; with the hands of office workers, slum dwellers, and suburban housewives that He gives. It is with the feet of soldiers and tramps that He walks, and with the heart of anyone in need that He begs and longs for shelter. And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving to Christ.... Not because it might be Christ who stays with us, comes to see us, takes up our time. Not because these people remind us of Christ.... but because they are Christ, asking us to find room for Him, exactly as He did at the first Christmas.¹

¹“Room for Christ,” *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (2005).

The men and women lying in hospitals and nursing homes are not his ambassadors, not his representatives, not his delegates. The homeless and addicted are not his emissaries and not his stunt doubles. The prisoner is not his envoy or lookalike; the stranger is not his surrogate nor substitute; the illegal alien is not his adjutant or aide. In our goodness to them, we comfort Jesus of Nazareth, the king of shreds and patches, the Word made hungry, thirsty, wounded flesh.

We also end this year knowing that when we care for the sick and the dying, the hungry and the lost, we not only serve Christ, we *are* Christ. As God Himself says in the book of Exodus, “I myself will look after and tend my sheep. As a shepherd tends his flock when he finds himself among his scattered sheep, so will I tend my sheep. I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered when it was cloudy and dark. I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest, says the Lord GOD. The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal...” These words are fulfilled in the followers of Christ. The suffering are not his stand-ins, and we are not his proxies. We tell Christ’s stories, we touch the wounded with his hands, we share his grief and his joy.

It is Christ we serve. It is Christ we are. We are the Christ with plenty sharing with the Christ in need. We are the Christ at home welcoming the wandering Christ. Just as the death and resurrection of Christ gives us life, we give Christ life when we care for him out on the street, down on his luck, lost in addiction, far from his friends, troubled in marriage, looking for answers, praying for health, crying in secret, staring at walls, reaching through bars, breathing his last.

These are his final words to us this year: *It is Christ you serve. It is Christ you are.*

Happy New Year.